

## The Curse of Ham: Biblical Justification for Racial Inequality?

Charles David Isbell,  
Louisiana State University

***Abstract:** The story of the drunkenness of Noah that caused him to remove his clothing and thus provided the opportunity for his son, Ham, to “see” him (Genesis 9:20–27), has never received an interpretation that has been unanimously adopted by interpreters over the centuries. By examining the concept of “nakedness” as it functions in biblical legislation, this article argues that the most plausible understanding of the passage is that Ham committed incest with the wife of his father, Noah. Concomitantly, it becomes clear that the literalist idea of “race” used to undergird either slavery or any comparable form of white supremacy cannot be derived exegetically from the passage.*

**Keywords:** Curse of Ham, Noah, Drunkenness, Incest, Nakedness

Can a man rake fire into his bosom and his clothing not be burned?  
Can a man walk on live coals and his feet not be scorched?  
It is the same for the one who has sex with the wife of  
another fellow;  
no one who touches her will go unpunished. (Proverbs 6:27–29)

Genesis 9:20–27 spins an enigmatic tale about Noah involving four issues that are still debated in the twenty-first century: family abuse, alcoholism/drunkenness, homosexuality, and/or incest. Taken literally, as with many early post-biblical translations and traditions, the story describes an act of voyeurism: viewing the genitalia of a drunken father by a son (who then reports the act to his two brothers), followed by a harsh curse upon the child of that son by the father.<sup>1</sup>

### The Literal Interpretation

Even in modern times, the literal interpretation has not been without advocates. More than a century ago, John Skinner argued as follows: “There is

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the LXX, Philo, and Josephus.

no reason to think ... that Canaan was guilty of any worse sin than the *Schadenfreude* implied in the words. Heb. Morality called for the utmost delicacy in such matters like that evinced by Shem and Japheth.”<sup>2</sup> Claus Westermann argued simply that nakedness was “disgraceful” in ancient societies, and concluded that the episode meant nothing more than that Ham should have covered his father instead of waiting on the two other brothers to do so.<sup>3</sup> Recently and most doggedly, Victor P. Hamilton has argued for “limiting Ham’s transgression simply to observing the exposure of the genitalia and failing to cover his naked father.”<sup>4</sup>

In support of the literal view, one can turn to the text itself, where Noah, “uncovered himself in the middle of his tent” (9:21b)—a phrase that offers no hint that any other person was present until Ham entered. Furthermore, the description of the action taken by the other two sons, Shem and Yaphet, seems to fit this interpretation as well—walking backward so as not to see their naked father as they approached to cover him (9:23). But this final phrase of verse twenty-three could easily be translated to provide an explanation of why they had been unaware of the incident until Ham bragged about it to them. It does no violence to the text as it stands to presume that they walked backward and covered their father’s nakedness after the fact because when it had happened, they had been facing an opposite direction, and “they had not seen (*lo’ ra’u*) the nakedness of their father.”

### Objections to the Literal Interpretation

To the contrary, however, while accepting a literal reading might appear to offer a simple pathway through the passage, there are several linguistic elements in the present text that arise to block that pathway. Initially, it must be acknowledged that the version retained in Genesis is almost certainly not the complete story. Addressing this point, esteemed professor of Bible, Nahum Sarna, offered the most reasonable assessment for this supposition: “Because the original incidents, in all their detail, were well known to the biblical audience and for reasons of delicate sensibility, only the

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<sup>2</sup> John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (Edinburgh, UK: T&T Clark, 1910), 183.

<sup>3</sup> Claus Westermann, *Genesis: A Practical Commentary*, trans. D. E. Green (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 9.

<sup>4</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1–17*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 323.

barest outline of his downfall is reported here. The fuller account, now lost, has been truncated and condensed, resulting in the many difficulties we now find in the narrative.”<sup>5</sup> This recognition of the textual difficulties led Professor Sarna to note that “the verbs of verse 24 and the severity of Noah’s reaction suggest that the Torah has suppressed the sordid details of some repugnant act.” Sarna then recalled two such repugnant acts that were suggested by the early rabbis: “Rabbinic sources are divided on whether Ham castrated his father or committed sodomy. The former interpretation might be supported by the fact that Noah has no children after the Flood.”<sup>6</sup>

Noted Christian authority Gerhard von Rad also viewed the narrative as “filled with difficulties and obscurities for which the final explanatory word has not yet been spoken.”<sup>7</sup> Read closely, the text itself indicates major problems with the literal idea. For example, when Noah awakened from his drunken sleep (9:24), he learned (*va-yeda*) “what his youngest son had *done* to him” (*‘asah lô*). Merely to have *seen* someone is not equivalent to having *done* something to him, and merely seeing one’s father naked surely cannot be deemed to be as negative as committing (“doing”) some abominable deed.

Three obvious puns in the short narrative also imply that something other than a straight literal interpretation must be considered. First, Canaan, the name of Ham’s son who is cursed for the action of his father, is derived from a root that carries the meaning “to be humbled” or “debased.” Second, the name of the first son of Noah is given as “Shem,” which is frequently evoked as “the divine epithet YHWH or the Divine Presence.”<sup>8</sup> Third, Yaphet (Japheth) is a play on the meaning of “enlarge.”

In other words, partly because of the truncation of the story and the concomitant difficulty in reading the text as it stands, interpreters since ancient times have offered a variety of explanations for the conduct of Ham, including the two ideas mentioned above: castration and incest. Five midrashic (i.e., decidedly non-literal) suggestions have been offered, each one of which raises specific difficulties for the interpreter.

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<sup>5</sup> Nahum Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1989) 63–64.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>7</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: Old Testament Library* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1972), 135.

<sup>8</sup> Sarna, *Genesis*, 67. See also his 357n12 for biblical examples of such usage. Examples of this phenomenon from rabbinic literature are too numerous to list.

## Midrashic Interpretations

[1] Voyeurism. As noted above, this position seeks the *peshat*, or simplest of all possibilities for understanding the text. Weighing against this choice are [a] the severity of the punishment, [b] the transfer of the punishment from the voyeur to his son, and [c] the reference at the end of verse 24 to Noah's discovery of "what his youngest son had *done* to him."<sup>9</sup> This wording led to Talmudic speculation (TB Sanh. 70a) that Canaan was the fourth son of Noah, thus the brother but not the son of Ham, again a midrashic view that finds no support in Genesis itself. It is also clear that Canaan is not mentioned in the narrative as taking part in the voyeurism instead of or along with Ham; he is not introduced until the moment of punishment.

An explanation of simple voyeurism appears inadequate in light of the fact that the chief literary purpose of the narrative appears to be the introduction of the theme of the extreme depravity of the Canaanites who, again according to the narrative itself, were represented in the story not by their namesake, but by his father, Ham.<sup>10</sup>

[2] Sodomy (TB Sanh 70a). This explanation is unsupported in the biblical text, but it is called forth secondarily with reference to the importance attached to the fact that something had been *done* to Noah.

[3] Castration. After he had thrown his rebellious sons, the Cyclopes, into the gloomy underworld of Tartarus, the Greek god Uranus fathered the Titans upon Mother Earth. As revenge, Mother Earth persuaded the Titans to attack their father, and armed the youngest of the seven, Cronus [Chronos], with a flint sickle. While Uranus slept, the merciless Cronus castrated him with the flint sickle. Also hovering in the background of this motif may be the Hurrian<sup>11</sup> legend of Kumarbi,<sup>12</sup> who bit off the genitals of his father, the deity Anu. The possibility that Ham might have castrated Noah, raised in the Talmud without specific reference to the Genesis text (TB Sanh70a), is faintly reminiscent of the Hurrian legend in multiple ways. First, Kumarbi, like Ham, was cursed for his actions; second, by the fact that Noah fathered no children

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<sup>9</sup> This notation is itself problematic when it is compared with the references in Genesis 7:13 and 9:18 to the sons of Noah that list Ham as the middle of three sons.

<sup>10</sup> See Sarna, *Genesis*, 64: "A major function of our present narrative is to introduce the theme of the depravity of the Canaanites."

<sup>11</sup> Hurrians were late bronze age residents in Anatolia and North Mesopotamia. Their most famous kingdom was Mitanni in the fifteenth–fourteenth centuries BCE.

<sup>12</sup> Known from Hittite mythological texts, Kumarbi is the son of the sky-god Anu and the weather god Teshub. The Hurrians identified him with El or Sumerian Enlil.

after the flood, as Genesis 9:29 indicates; and third, that both Kumarbi and Ham “laughed” at their father.

[4] Bestiality. *Bereshit Rabbah*<sup>13</sup> offers three distinct explanations, none based on the Genesis text as it stands. Its first explanation is that Noah was angry with Ham for having prevented him from fathering a fourth son, perhaps reflecting the idea of castration. Second, it then explains that cohabitation of any sort had been denied to Noah, and notes that since cohabitation occurs in the dark, the descendants of Ham are deemed to have been punished by being cursed with dark skin. The third position is then articulated by R. Hiyya with the claim that Ham had copulated with a dog on the ark, leading his progeny to be “Ugly and dark-skinned.” The dog also is cursed by exposing his copulation in public.

[5] Instead of sodomy with his father, incest with the wife of his father, presumably his own mother. The chief exponent of the explanation of incest was F. W. Bassett.<sup>14</sup> But after suggesting incest as the best possibility to explain the sin of Ham, Bassett noted that it fails to square with what appears to be the plain wording of 9:22–23. As a result, he was required to admit that verse 23 in the story is so out of place that it should be assigned to a later redactor who no longer remembered the details of the event. It was precisely the need to avoid what he considers just such an unnecessary rupture of the text that induced Victor Hamilton to reject the suggestion of Bassett and argue for, “limiting Ham’s transgression simply to observing the exposure of the genitalia and failing to cover his naked father.”<sup>15</sup>

But in fact, verses 22 and 23 may also be read as support for the idea of incest. The text is clear that Shem and Yaphet pointedly did *not* do whatever Ham *did* do. If verse 22 describes the act of incest, then verse 23 serves as an explicitly opposite act by the other two sons. By their action, they provided the protection to their mother that should have come from their father, shielding her from further humiliation and ravishment. This fits into the broader context of the story that underlines the inability of Noah to protect his wife because he was in a drunken stupor. Support for this linkage of

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<sup>13</sup> *Bereshit Rabbah* in *Midrash Rabbah* I (Noah, XXXVI. 7).

<sup>14</sup> Frederick W. Bassett, “Noah’s Nakedness and the Curse of Canaan, a Case of Incest?,” *Vetus Testamentum* 21, no. 2 (1971): 232–37, <http://doi.org/10.2307/1517286>. See also, G. Rice, “The Curse That Never Was,” *Journal of Religious Thought* 29 (1972) 5–27. Walter Brueggemann agrees with Bassett in Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Genesis* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1982), 90.

<sup>15</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), 323.

drunkenness that resulted in incest is found in the only other Genesis narrative that mentions drunkenness. Genesis 19:32–38 chronicles the actions of Lot’s daughters deliberately getting their father drunk for the specific purpose of committing incest with him.<sup>16</sup>

This brings up another critical point in the narrative: Abraham has not yet been introduced in Genesis. When he does appear for the first time two chapters later (11:26), the focus of Genesis immediately begins to morph from narratives about the entire human race to stories about a single family chosen to serve as an example to all other families about the value of partnership with and obedience to the one God. A major part of this narrowing focus deals with the promise to Abraham that his descendants will one day come into ownership of the land of Canaan. For that to happen, the Abrahamic descendants would have to dispossess the Canaanites and take over their territory. If Ham had impregnated his mother incestuously, the result was Canaan, who would have been born under a curse because of the way in which he had been conceived. This possibility explains why the son, Canaan, was cursed rather than the father. He was the product of a detestable act of incest, and his “children” became the Canaanites whose sexual depravity was legendary, a level of depravity that furnished the reason for the defeat of Canaan by the invading Israelites (see Lev 18:24–30).

In this context, Sarna’s explanation of the purpose served by including this episode in the life of Noah is exactly on target. He notes first “that a *major function* of our present narrative is to introduce the theme of the depravity of the Canaanites,” before underscoring the sharp contrast offered by the narrative which “illustrates the virtue and piety of the original ancestor, Shem, values that are to serve as the paradigm for his descendants, the Israelites. By the same token, the typically degenerate state of the Canaanites provides the reason and moral justification for their displacement.”<sup>17</sup>

Granted that incest would have been an act that could fit well with most of the difficulties<sup>18</sup> presented in the text as it stands, the key question to

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<sup>16</sup> On this incident, see Charles David Isbell, “Nice Jewish Girls: Liquor, Sex, and Power in Antiquity,” *Studies in Jewish Civilization* 14 (2004) 23–32.

<sup>17</sup> Sarna, *Genesis*, 64.

<sup>18</sup> One issue not so easily solved, is the description of the sinful perpetrator against Noah as his “youngest son.” Elsewhere, as noted above, the three sons of Noah are always listed as Shem-Ham-Yaphet, implying that Ham is the middle. This single phrase led the rabbis to speculate that Canaan must have been the fourth son of Noah. For details, see Ephraim Isaac, “Ham (Person),” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, vol. 3, *H–J* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 31–32. Ephraim Isaac thinks the explanation here was a separate

be asked is: Can it be shown to a plausible certainty that the language of Genesis 9 expresses an act of incest?

### **The Meaning of ‘ervah**

All of the possible explanations by interpreters—both ancient and modern—have dealt only in passing with the meaning of the word ‘ervah, “nakedness.” Yet this is surely the key word in the short narrative. Elsewhere in biblical texts, ‘ervah may be used non-sexually or figuratively (e.g., Gen. 42:9 [undefended or vulnerable regions of a country]; Isa. 20:4; 47:3; Ezek. 16:27; 23:10,29 [shameful punishment due to Egypt, Babylon, Jerusalem]), but its typical referential field revolves around a description of the private sexual organs of males and/or females. Of particular interest are the numerous occurrences of ‘ervah in Leviticus.

Leviticus 18:3 sets the general context: “You shall not copy the practices of the land of Egypt where you dwelled, or of the land of Canaan to which I am taking you; nor shall you follow their laws.” Then ‘ervah is defined as follows, all under the assumption that the practices forbidden to the Israelites were acceptable to the Canaanites.

Leviticus 18:8: “The nakedness of your father’s wife is nakedness that belongs to your father” (‘ervat ‘abiv hi’).<sup>19</sup>

18:16: “The nakedness of your brother’s wife is nakedness that belongs to your brother” (‘ervat ‘ahikha hi’).

20:11: “The man who lies with the wife of his father has uncovered the nakedness that belongs to his father” (‘ervat ‘abiv).

20:20: “The man who lies with the wife of his uncle has uncovered the nakedness that belongs to his uncle” (‘ervat dodo).

20:21: “The man who takes the wife of his brother, this is indecency,<sup>20</sup> has uncovered the nakedness that belongs to his brother” (‘ervat ‘ahiv).

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fragment from the original “J” story, and that Canaan was actually Noah’s fourth son. This is found also in *Talmud Bavli*.

<sup>19</sup> Baruch Levine, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Leviticus* (New York: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 120. Levine translates the phrase, “the nakedness reserved for your father,” and explains that “only one’s father has access to one’s mother’s sexuality” (emphasis added).

<sup>20</sup> On this meaning of *niddah*, see Levine, *Leviticus*, 139.

These examples clearly show the idea that the *'ervah* of a man's wife belonged to the husband exclusively. Sexual relations with the wife of another man, that is to uncover the *'ervah* of such a woman, would have meant violating the possession of her husband.<sup>21</sup> Of course, if that wife were the mother of the perpetrator, or even merely the wife of his father, the violation would then also be incest.

### Conclusion and Final Thoughts

A survey of all five of the suggested and possible interpretations of the action of Ham in this passage leads to the inference that incest is the explanation that fits the greater part of the evidence and provides a plausible supposition. Yet the function of the passage has only rarely been determined by exegesis alone. The nature of the curse to which Canaan was subjected has often pushed into the background any consideration of the actions of Ham. And the sad history of the way in which the passage has functioned, particularly in fundamental Christian communities, has both obscured the exegetically defensible and highlighted only the ideologically *eisegetical*.

The most shameful misuse of the story is found among various groups of extreme Christian fundamentalists who have advanced a literal pseudo-scientific reading of the text that makes the three sons of Noah representative of one-third of the human race each (Gen. 9:19: "From them the whole world branched out"). Following this reasoning, Shem was the father of the "Semites," including the Hebrews. Yepheth headed the people who became known as "Caucasians," and this left Ham to be considered as the father of the black peoples of the world. Such a view is required to overlook the fact that the text, as it stands, specifies that the punishment of Ham falls on his son, Canaan, who is "cursed" and consigned to be a slave—"the lowest slave in the world" *'eved 'avadim*—his brothers (9:25).

But recent archaeological results have demonstrated that the people of Canaan and the Israelites shared broad aspects of material culture, exhibiting so much similarity that scholars are hard pressed to distinguish Israelite artifacts from Canaanite ones. And the clear testimony of Scripture itself documents the fact that the Hebrew language was first of all a dialect of "the

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<sup>21</sup> This same general idea underlies the sentiment in Proverbs 6:34–35, describing a jealous husband who cannot be placated after his wife has been violated by another man in an adulterous affair. Other prohibitions in Leviticus 18 and 20 pertain to sisters (and half-sisters) and aunts. According to the rule of *פרט וכלל* (specific to general) a generic prohibition results: "No one shall come near to anyone who is of his own flesh to uncover nakedness" (18:6).



language of Canaan” (שפת כנען).<sup>22</sup> Linguistically, “Canaanite” was quintessentially “Semitic,” and efforts to force the descendants of Canaan into a racial mold different from that of the early biblical Hebrews are misguided and wrong. When the question of “Why?” is broached, the apparent answer is that the story of Noah and Ham was not exegeted. To the contrary, those whose economic fortunes depended upon the institution of slavery immediately initiated a search for a biblical way to defend the indefensible.

Generations of fundamentalists have cited this passage as a biblical justification for slavery, political leaders of the Confederacy believed it to provide justification for going to war in order to protect slavery,<sup>23</sup> and more than one major Protestant faction became a separate denomination founded on this very idea.<sup>24</sup> But the use of Genesis to support slavery, approve of a Jim Crow society, suppress voting rights, or support a related purpose that involves isolating and persecuting any group other than one’s own is the most shameful misuse of Scripture imaginable. However the sin of Ham is defined—and it is unlikely at this late stage that any single interpretation will achieve unanimity among scholars—the story has nothing to do with “race,” a marker that to modern science, has lost all meaning and validity. In her answer to the question, “What is race, exactly?” Elizabeth Kolbert is precisely on point: “Science tells us there is no genetic or scientific basis for it. Instead it’s largely a made-up label, used to define and separate us.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> See for example Isaiah 19:18. In fact, early Phoenician, Ugaritic, Moabite, and Edomite are also, along with Hebrew, members of the same Canaanite branch of the Northwest Semitic linguistic family.

<sup>23</sup> See the discussion in Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise: The Truth About the American Church’s Complicity in Racism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019), 70–87.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 82–85. See also his citation of the books by George D. Armstrong, *The Christian Doctrine of Slavery* (New York: Scribner, 1857) and Robert Louis Dabney, *A Defence of Virginia (and through Her, of the South) in Recent and Pending Contests against the Sectional Party* (New York: E. J. Hale, 1867).

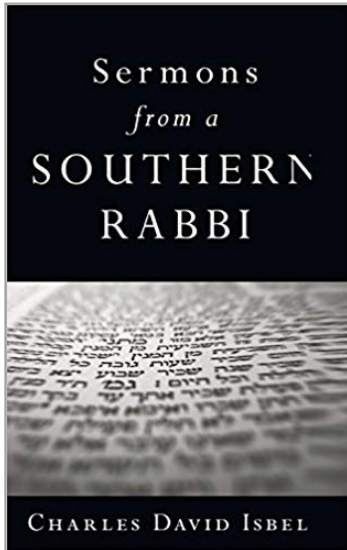
<sup>25</sup> Elizabeth Kolbert, “Skin Deep,” *National Geographic*, 2018, 28–41.

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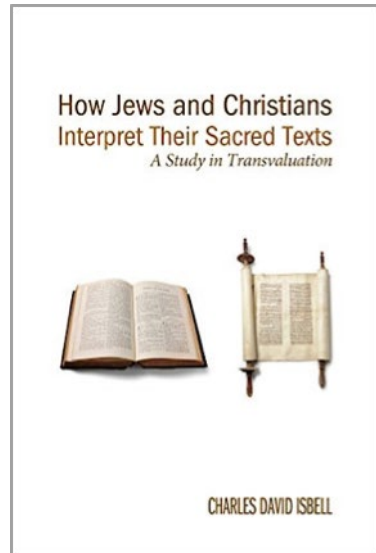
#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

[Charles David Isbell](http://www.cdisbell.online) is the Jewish Studies Professor at Louisiana State University. He holds the Ph.D. in Hebrew and Judaic Studies from Brandeis University and is a past president of the Kansas-Missouri region of the Society of Biblical Literature. For additional biographic and bibliographic information about Dr. Isbell, see his website: [www.cdisbell.online](http://www.cdisbell.online).

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